DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 372 HE 032 595

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TITLE Misperceptions of College Drinking Norms: An Exploratory Study of Gender and Grade Level Differences.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the U.S. Department of Education's Annual National Meeting on Alcohol, Other Drug, and Violence Prevention (13th, Albany, NY, November 6-9, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alcohol Abuse; *Alcohol Education; Alcoholism; *College Freshmen; College Students; *Drinking; Higher Education; Questionnaires; *Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior; *Student Subcultures; Student Surveys
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ABSTRACT

Recently drinking-related deaths on college campuses have received wide media attention, prompting administrators to explore new ways of dealing with this problem. This study, conducted at Manhattan College (New York), focuses on exploring student perceptions about appropriate drinking behavior. Information was collected from a sample population (n=361) that included freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Students completed questionnaires that examined their personal attitudes towards alcohol, as well as their perceptions about campus norms towards alcohol. Freshmen were instructed to answer based on their perceptions of what they expected would happen in college and their actual use in high school. The study confirmed the hypothesis that freshmen's perceptions of their drinking behavior are strongly related to how much they actually drink; their view of campus norms for alcohol use is moderate and changes over time as they progress through school to senior year. The study also confirmed gender differences in attitudes toward drinking. A stronger indicator of alcohol abuse than the campus norm measure was students' personal attitudes and their perceptions of what their friends do. As a result of this study, Manhattan College has received a grant to influence misperceptions of appropriate drinking behavior among incoming freshmen students. (JM)

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Misperceptions of College Drinking Norms:

An exploratory study of gender and grade level differences

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Paper presented at the U.S. Dept. of Education 13th Annual National Meeting on Alcohol, Other Drug and Violence Prevention in Higher Education, Nov. 6-9, 1999, Albany

MISPERCEPTIONS PROJECT

EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Data released from the OASAS Highlights of Alcohol and Drug Use among College Students in New York State, 1996 (www.oasas.state.ny.us) indicate that 40% of students used alcohol once a week or more. 48% of upstate students and 28% of New York City students engaged in binge drinking.

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Furthermore, the OASAS data indicate that 20% reported no alcohol or substance abuse and in New York City, 28% reported no use. On the National level, a Harvard University study last year (1998) reported that 42.7 % of students had been binge drinking in the two weeks before they were surveyed. As a result of these data, we decided to explore some of the perceptions of our students regarding drinking behavior. Recently drinking-related deaths on college campuses have received wide media coverage and have prompted administrators to explore ways to deal with this problem.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Colleges have been looking for new methods of prevention that are different than the traditional behavioral and environmental approaches which include scare tactics (examples such as showing displays of wrecked cars in a public area of the campus) or peer mediation, which has been moderately successful. Colleges have moved away from the approaches that give attention to extreme cases of public drunkenness or other extreme examples, because there is focus on a behavior that is negative and that is often not a common behavior. Yet, students and faculty get the impression that this kind of behavior is not uncommon. In other words, the situation stays alive in the minds of students and faculty because of the public display of it.

Efforts on many campuses had been focused on behavioral and/or environmental variables, some successful, some not. Some more recent research has focused on student perceptions; the current study was based on this approach. Specifically, a model which applies "social norms" theory to alcohol and drug problems on college campuses (Berkowitz, 1994; Perkins, 1992; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins and Wechsler, 1996) was employed. The basic idea is that there is a discrepancy between the actual amount of

alcohol consumed by students and the amount of alcohol they perceive that their peers consume. The Social Norms model shifts the focus from behavioral to cognitive and combats the misperceptions of students instead of trying to combat their actual behavior. The current study was an effort to explore the perceptions of our students about the use of alcohol, about the campus norms regarding alcohol, and the impact of these perceptions on alcohol use. While Perkins and Wechsler have explored this question, they did not examine age and gender differences. This current study also looked at age and gender differences.

METHODOLOGY

Information was collected on three measures to look at the relationship between student perceptions and alcohol use. The sample included freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors [N = 361]. With regard to the Freshmen, and important in interpreting the study is when the data was collected. The data was obtained very early in the fall. Freshmen were instructed to answer based on their perceptions of what they thought happened in college and their actual use based on their actual use, assuming that most of that was in high school. We wanted to be sure that we were measuring what they thought when they first came to college. We were particularly interested in whether there were grade and gender differences between our freshmen and seniors regarding their personal attitudes about drinking. Perkins & Wechsler (1996) formulated a survey that we modified slightly to examine students' perceptions. The Personal Alcohol Attitude [PAA] measures what amount of alcohol students believe is appropriate for college students to drink in certain situations. The Students' Perceptions of Campus Norms [PCN] measures what students' perceptions are regarding campus norms about alcohol use. The Index of Personal Alcohol Abuse [IPAA] is based on the negative consequences of drinking. Perkins and

Wechsler (1996) found that a student's personal perception and that of the campus norm significantly contributed to their own drinking behavior and if that norm is perceived as permissive, the student is more likely to abuse alcohol, even apart from the influence of their own personal attitude. The student with a permissive personal view is encouraged to act on personal tendencies toward abuse if he perceives the campus norm as permissive. Perkins and Wechsler showed that the Personal Alcohol Attitude [PAA] was a better predictor of Alcohol Abuse than Perceived Campus Norms [PCN]. This finding is also supported by earlier research done by Perkins and Berkowitz (1986).

RESULTS

An analysis of our data (N=361) suggests that our students have a moderate Personal Alcohol Attitude [PAA] ($\underline{M}$ = 9.54). Perkins & Wechsler reported a mean > 10 as permissive. When this measure is examined by gender and age, the mean for females was similar from freshman year to senior year ($\underline{M}$ = 7.9 and $\underline{M}$ = 7.4 respectively), whereas the mean for males from freshman to senior year changed significantly (from $\underline{M}$ = 12.7 to $\underline{M}$ = 9.1, $t(75) = 2.54$, $p<.05$). These results suggest that male freshmen have more permissive attitudes than do female freshmen and female seniors, and that their attitudes change significantly as they move through college. They become less permissive in their attitude as they mature.

The Students' Perceptions of Campus Norms [PCN] measures what students' perceptions are regarding campus norms about alcohol use. Scores could range from 5 to 20. Students were asked the degree to which they agreed with a statement about giving advice to a new student. For example, they might be given the statement "students here admire non-drinkers." The mean on the Perceived Campus Norms scale, the PCN, was 6.72 (5.48, S.D. = 2.63). Based

on the Perkins norms, this mean suggests that our students' perceptions of campus norms reflect a perception that our campus norm is moderate. The means for freshmen (M = 6.5) and for seniors (M = 7.1), indicate that our students do not have a permissive view about the campus norms (M > 10). A 2 x 2 (grade by gender) factorial ANOVA showed a main effect for gender. Post analysis indicated no significant difference between the mean score of females from freshmen (M = 6.7) to senior year (M = 6.3). By contrast, significant differences in the mean for males from freshmen (M = 6.3) to Senior (M = 7.9) year were evident ($t(55) = 2.48$, $p < .05$). These data suggest that regarding perceptions of what are the campus norms for alcohol use, our female students do not change their perception from Freshman to Senior year, whereas the male students do and their perception becomes somewhat more moderate, but not permissive.

As stated previously, the Index of Personal Alcohol Abuse [IPAA] is based on the negative consequences of drinking. The question asked was which of the following occurred once or more than once during the academic year as a result of your own drinking? Examples of possible choices included 1) had a hangover, 2) missed a class, 3) damaged property. The scores could range from 0 to 24. On the IPAA, the means for freshmen and seniors by Gender are reported below:

Table I: means and standard deviations on the Index of Personal Alcohol Abuse [IPAA]

Grade	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Freshmen Female	9.6	48	6.3
Freshmen Male	14.2	26	7.06
Senior Female	4.9	29	4.9
Senior Male	9.9	31	7.8

The mean for all freshmen (M = 11.3) was significantly different than the mean for seniors (M = 7.5) (t (132) = 3.07, p < .01). Both the female and male means were significantly different by grade and gender (For females: t (75) = 2.8, p< .01; for males: t (55) = 3.9,
P < .01). The female students are less likely than the male students to abuse alcohol. Both groups significantly decrease their perceptions of negative consequences as a result of alcohol use from freshmen to senior year. However, male students appear to indicate more consequences overall than do female students.

Finally, a linear regression examined predictors of alcohol abuse. Specifically, we examined the effect of gender, grade, perceptions of college alcohol norms [PCN] and personal alcohol attitude [PAA] on the Index of Personal Alcohol Abuse [IPAA]. The univariate analysis was significant, F (4,245) = 38.764, p< .01. Adjusted R^2 = .378. While all the variables were significant predictors (p<. 05), PAA followed by grade were the best predictors (Grade effect size = -.205; PAA effect size = .518; both significant @ p<.001). These results confirm prior work by Perkins (1996) that the PAA is the strongest predictor of actual alcohol abuse. For our students, grade level is also significant. Clearly our students change their behavior [IPAA] and perceptions [PAA] between freshmen and Senior year. This research has indicated to us the importance of looking at perceptions early in the college life of our students.

IMPLICATIONS

This study confirmed our hypotheses that Freshmen engage in misperceptions about their personal attitude about alcohol. Their personal

attitude [PAA] about appropriate behavior regarding drinking is strongly related to how they actually drink. Their view of what are campus norms about the actual use of alcohol on our campus (PCN) is moderate and does change over time. We also realize that males and females have different attitudes, something we always thought, but have now confirmed. We would like to direct our efforts at students' personal attitude and their perceptions of what their friends do. This was a stronger indicator of alcohol abuse than the campus norm measure. The results from that measure were more indicative of a less than permissive perception and parallel our current efforts within our community.

Thus, future research and models for intervention on college campuses must address possible gender and age differences in exploring how best to develop programs regarding the consumption of alcohol by college students.

As a result of this study, we received a grant to engage in changing the misperceptions of our incoming freshmen classes. Since perceptions seem to change over the course of students' lives on campus, it may be more important to influence early, those perceptions that incoming Freshmen bring to campus. We expect to draw on the work of Berkowitz (1997) who has explored moving from a reactive to a proactive prevention program on college campuses and Haines & Spear (1996) who have examined how to change the perception of the norm of binge drinking. Their work in particular has been the basis for a large media project to change student perceptions at Northern Illinois University and has spawned efforts on many college campuses to engage in programs that address alcohol issues through misperceptions thecry.

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